



Settlement Ross, 1841. I.G. Voznesenskii.

WELCOME TO FORT ROSS STATE HISTORIC PARK

Fort Ross State Historic Park is one of the oldest parks in the California State Park System. It was established in 1906 to set aside a unique site where Russians, with the help of Alaska natives, developed a colony in California. Fort Ross was a Russian-American Company settlement between the years 1812 and 1841. It was built on the seasonal home of Native Californians, the Kashaya, who have lived in this area for centuries. In addition to the fort, the Call Ranch House and buildings just north of the fort are preserved from the American Ranch Era which followed the Russian settlement. From the fort and ranch buildings, the Pacific Ocean, the broad sweep of the coastal terraces and the densely forested ridges can be viewed.

Kashaya Pomo—The First Inhabitants

The Kashaya, the Native people of this area, lived on the lands from the Gualala to the Russian Rivers. The name Kashaya, which means “expert gamblers,” was given to them by a neighboring Pomo group. The Kashaya were superbly matched to their environment. They moved their homes from the ridges in the winter to the ocean shore in the summer, hunting and gathering food from the ocean and the land. Along the shore there were plentiful supplies of abalone, mussels and fish, and a rich variety of sea plants. Sea salt was harvested for domestic use as well as for trading. Plants, acorns and animals (deer, elk and a vast number of smaller animals) provided an abundant variety of foods inland. The Kashaya excelled in the art of basket making. Their first encounter with Europeans was with the Russians.

Russian Movement into North America

Beginning in 1742, Russian *promyshlenniki* (frontiersmen) began to leave the Siberian mainland to seek fur-bearing marine mammals on and near the many islands to the east. The first permanent settlement was on Kodiak Island in what is now Alaska. It was built by Gregor Shelikov in 1784. The organization he led became the Russian-American Company in 1799. That year Tsar Paul granted the company a charter that gave it a complete monopoly over all Russian enterprises in North America. In 1806 the company was granted its own flag. The operation expanded still further when American ship captains began to contract with the Russians for joint ventures, seeking sea otter pelts along the coast of Alta and Baja California. The man behind this was Alexander Baranov, an employee of the Russian-American Company since its founding and a resident of North America since 1791. Baranov and Captain Joseph O’Cain developed the system in which Native Alaskan hunters traveled south aboard American ships to hunt sea otters along the coast of California. In Alaska, Sitka, which the Russians called New Archangel, became the capital of the region in 1804. Large profits began to flow to company shareholders who included members of the Russian nobility.

Early Contact between the Russians and the Spanish

The first significant contact between the Russians and the Spanish came in April 1806. Nikolai Rezanov had arrived in Sitka the previous year to inspect the Alaskan colonies. He found them on the verge of starvation and decided to sail southward to Spanish California in hopes of obtaining relief supplies for the settlements. Though Rezanov knew that foreign ships were not allowed to trade in California, he sailed his ship, the *Juno*, into San Francisco Bay. Within six weeks, his diplomatic skills enabled the *Juno* to pass again through the Golden Gate on its return to Sitka, loaded with grain and other food from the Spanish mission gardens.

Plans for a Russian Settlement on the California Coast

Rezanov returned with two ideas from his venture into Spanish California—the desire to establish permanent trade relations and the wish to establish a trading base on what the Russians referred to as the “New Albion” coast north of Spanish territory. Baranov sent Ivan Kuskov, a company employee of long standing, on a voyage to locate a site suitable for the planned settlement. Kuskov arrived at Bodega Bay on the ship *Kodiak* on January 8, 1809, remaining there until late August. He and his party of 40 Russians and 150 Alaskan



Nicolai Petrovich Rezanov, nobleman and advisor to the Tsar. In 1806 he called for southward expansion of Russian America.

Natives explored the entire region, and brought back more than 2,000 sea otter pelts. Kuskov decided that the most suitable location for the colony was a Native Kashaya village called *Metini* 18 miles to the north. Although it lacked the deep-water anchorage of Bodega’s outer bay, it provided plentiful water, good soil, forage and pasture, and a nearby supply of timber for the necessary construction. In addition, its relative inaccessibility from Spanish-occupied territory gave it an advantage in terms of defense.

By November 1811, Kuskov was ready to head south again from the company headquarters in Sitka, this time to build a colony on the New Albion shore. After arriving at Bodega Bay in early 1812 aboard the *Chirikov*, he proceeded to the site of Settlement Ross with



Ivan Kuskov selected the site of Fort Ross and served there as manager from 1812 to 1821.

some twenty-five Russians and eighty Alaskans. He set up a temporary camp and began building houses and a sturdy wooden stockade. The colony was established to grow wheat and other crops for the Russian settlements in Alaska, to hunt the marine mammals and to trade with Spanish California. The colony was formally dedicated on August 13, 1812 and given the name “Ross,” most likely to poetically highlight its connection with Imperial Russia (*Rossii*).

In 1812 San Francisco Bay marked the northern limit of Spanish settlement. That summer, while the settlement was being built, Spain, France, Russia and the other great colonial powers of the day were preoccupied with a major war. Napoleon’s army was deep inside Russia. Great Britain was at war with the United States of America. Nobody was in a position to block the Russian move. It was several months before the civil and military leaders of Spanish California were even aware of the Russian settlement.

Life at the Ross Colony

The structures were built of redwood using joinery techniques that were typical of Northern Russian and maritime carpentry in those days. A wooden palisade surrounded the site, in much the same configuration as reconstructed today. Included were two blockhouses, one on the north corner, another on the south, both fortified with cannons, and a bell tower in the east corner. The interior of the stockade contained the two-story house of the manager, Ivan Kuskov, the clerk’s quarters, artisans’ workshops, barracks for Russian employees and various storehouses and other structures. The chapel was added in the mid-1820s. A well in the center of the fort compound provided the colonists with an emergency supply of water. Lower-ranking company employees and people of mixed ancestry lived in a village complex that gradually grew up outside the northwest stockade walls. Just southwest of the stockade, on the bluff above the ocean, was the site of the Native Alaskan village.

Only a small number of Russians actually lived at Ross. There were very few Russian women. Inter-marriage between Russians and the natives of Alaska was commonplace. Their children, known as Creoles, formed a large part of the colony’s population. Many of the Alaska native men lived and had children with Kashaya and Coast Miwok women.

Life at the colony under Kuskov involved agri-



Alexander Andreovich Baranov, governor of Russian America. In 1812 he ordered his assistant, Ivan Kuskov to establish a permanent settlement at Fort Ross.

boats were sold and traded to the Spanish, and four Russian-American Company ships, the first built on the California coast, were constructed at shipways in the sandy cove below the settlement. Most of the hunting and capturing of marine mammals was done by the Alutiiq men from Kodiak Island in the service of the company. They would go out in their kayaks (called *baidarkas* by the Russians) to hunt the sea mammals. The Alaskans and their Russian overseers traveled the coast from Baja California to Oregon, in search of marine mammals. Sea otter pelts were extraordinarily valuable in the China trade.

By 1820 extensive hunting had depleted the sea otter population to such a degree that manufacturing, agriculture and stock raising became the primary occupations of the colony. Coastal fog, gophers and lack of farming experience all combined to thwart the effort to supply the Alaskan settlements. Ranches and farms were established at inland sites—at Willow Creek on the *Slavyanka* (now known as the Russian River), and near the present towns of Bodega and Graton—but they could not produce enough food.

Russia’s contribution to scientific knowledge about California was immense. Russian scientific voyages studied geography, cartography, ethnography, geology, meteorology, hydrography, botany and biology. Some of the earliest charts of California’s north coast were drawn on Russian voyages. The California poppy, *Eschscholzia californica*, was named by Adelbert von Chamisso after his colleague Johann Friedrich Eschscholtz. Both scientists visited California in 1816 on the Russian scientific exploring expedition aboard the brig *Riurik*. Another naturalist and artist, Ilya Voznesenskii, visited Settlement Ross and California for a year in 1840. He collected specimens of California’s flora and fauna along with an invaluable ethnographic collection of California Native artifacts, many of which are on display in the Peter the Great Kunstkamera Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia.



Flag of the Russian-American Company, 1806

The Russians Abandon Their California Settlement

In 1839 the Russian-American Company signed an agreement with the Hudson’s Bay Company settlements in present-day Washington and Oregon to supply Sitka with provisions. Soon afterward, Russia decided to abandon the Ross Colony. First, they offered to sell it to the Hudson’s Bay Company. When that failed, they approached Mariano Vallejo and others. In December 1841, they reached an agreement with John Sutter of New Helvetia in the Sacramento Valley. Within a few months, the Russians were gone. Although Sutter never lived at Fort Ross, he sent his trusted assistant, John Bidwell, to gather up the hardware and other valuables, including herds of cattle, sheep and other animals, and transport them to Sutter’s Fort in the Sacramento Valley. Thereafter, the buildings at Fort Ross that were not dismantled and removed by Sutter were used for a variety of purposes by successive owners.

The Post-Russian Period

In 1843 Wilhelm Otto Benitz came to manage Fort Ross for Sutter; he eventually acquired the ranch and the Benitz family lived at Fort Ross until 1867. The property was then sold to James Dixon and Lord Fairfax, who ran a lumber operation until 1872. In 1873, the area was purchased by George W. Call, who established the 15,000-acre Call Ranch, which was worked into the 20th century. Cordwood, railroad ties, fence posts and tanbark as well as apples and dairy products were the principal exports of the Call Ranch. The present-day coast highway was established in the 1920s, but primary access to the Call Ranch continued to be from the ocean. A wharf was built by the Calls at the foot of the bluff in the most sheltered part of the cove. A 180-foot-long chute carried lumber and other bulk cargo directly from the top of the bluff to ships anchored in the bay. The Call family owned the property until 1973.

In 1903 the California Historical Landmarks Committee purchased the stockade area from the Calls. In March 1906, the State of California acquired the site. Since then more acreage has been acquired to preserve the surrounding environment. Extensive restoration and reconstruction has been carried out by California State

Parks. Fort Ross has also been designated a National Historic Landmark.

Natural History

Fort Ross is located on a wave-cut marine terrace between the ocean to the southwest and the high, forest-covered hills to the northeast. The southeastern portion of the park is characterized by steep bluffs that drop several hundred feet into the sea. In contrast to this rugged shore line, Sandy Cove (below the fort) possesses still water and a serene beach. Fort Ross Creek, slightly over two miles long, flows in a northwesterly direction to Sandy Cove, its course having been displaced some 3,000 feet by movement along the San Andreas Fault, California’s major earthquake rift zone. The fault comes ashore two miles south of the fort and runs parallel to the coast and through the old Russian orchard. The park has many visible features of the fault, such as sag ponds, escarpments and other land forms. Damaged trees and an offset fence are evidence of the earth’s movement during the 1906 earthquake.

Four distinct types of vegetation exist in the park: redwood and coniferous forest, grasslands, scrub, and coastal strand. Open grasslands predominate on the coastal shelf, while Bishop pine and Douglas fir occupy the upland slopes. Stands of old-growth and second-growth redwood can be found in the protected hollows and ravines.



Kuskov House

The climate at Fort Ross is influenced by the dominant high-pressure area of the northern Pacific Ocean, inland low-pressure conditions and the temperature of the ocean waters. Winter storms frequently batter the coastline with gale-force winds, which can severely damage vegetation and structures. In contrast to the relatively dry summer season, rainfall between November and April averages about 35 inches. Normal total annual rainfall is 44 inches. Summer

air temperatures are mild, with days averaging in the high 50s and low 60s, and nighttime temperatures dropping to the low 40s. The freezing point is reached only occasionally. Spring can be quite windy, and summer often brings a marine layer of thick fog.



Rotchev House

The wildlife of Fort Ross is diverse. Land animals common to the area include the mountain lion, bobcat, gray fox, raccoon, black-tailed deer, brush rabbit, ground squirrel, pocket gopher, broad-handed mole, and black-tailed hare. Marine mammals commonly seen include harbor seals, sea lions and migrating grey whales. Birds observed are osprey, red-tailed and red-shouldered hawks, turkey vultures, kestrels, herons, hummingbirds and various shore birds.

Our Mission

The mission of the California Department of Parks and Recreation is to provide for the health, inspiration and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state’s extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation.



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